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THE NEEDIEST CASES

After What Seemed Like One Miracle, She Is Praying for Another

By Channing Joseph

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Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Mirna B. López with her son Michael Chiché in her apartment in Bushwick, Brooklyn. After a transplant, Ms. López worries that she may not be able to afford the medication she needs



Every year since 1911, The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund has provided direct assistance to children, families and the elderly in New York. Articles will appear daily through Jan. 30, illustrating the difference that even a modest amount of money can make in easing the struggles of the poor.

Last year, 10,428 donors contributed \$6,280,242, which was distributed to those in need through seven New York charities.

All around Mirna B. López's modest one-bedroom apartment in Bushwick, Brooklyn, are reminders of God.

"I pray too much," said Ms. López, a Pentecostalist who is active in her church.

In the kitchen, just above the stove, where Ms. López, 46, often cooks traditional Guatemalan dishes for her children, is a small, gold-colored bas-relief of the Last Supper. Beneath it, a sign in Spanish: "Kitchen closed on Sundays." And then there are the poems — on the wall, in the doorway, hanging from the ceiling — each reflecting Ms. López's approach to life.

"Always fight for your ideals," one reads. "They will be easy to achieve with God's help."

It is a sentiment that Ms. López demonstrated as a high school student in her native Guatemala in the 1980s. Though thousands had been killed or had disappeared during a civil war that had engulfed the country for decades, she joined in rallies to protest the violence.

A cousin had already been held for six months and tortured. Then Ms. López's photograph, taken as she helped lead a march, was published in a newspaper. Ms. López knew she might be in danger, so she left a son, Daniel Mejía, with relatives and traveled to the United States in 1984, obtaining political asylum.

“God is your protector,” reads another poem hanging in the living room. “There is no place where his presence cannot help you.”

The words echo Ms. López’s determined faith, as she has struggled to raise three children on her own in New York and to live with a chronic illness.

In November 2008, doctors warned Ms. López that she had, perhaps, a year to live. She had learned seven years earlier that her kidneys were failing. Now she badly needed a transplant, and no compatible donor had been found.

“Your heart is very weak,” she recalled the doctors telling her. Her blood tests did not look good either: “Your potassium is very high. Your phosphorus is very high,” she recalls them saying.

But through prayer, Ms. López said, everything had turned around within a month: by December, her blood work was normal again, and even more important, a kidney donor had been found.

“This is a miracle,” she remembered thinking.

In other areas of life, Ms. López is still waiting for God to intervene.

Ms. López, who cleans apartments for a living, had missed months of work because of her illness, which required regular dialysis. The landlord was threatening to evict her and the two children still at home: Michael Chiché, now 24, and Mirna S. López, 17. (Her youngest son, Mauricio Chiché, 20, joined the [Marines](#) two years ago, and her oldest son, Daniel, remained in Guatemala.)

Knowing she needed to make some money quickly, Ms. López struggled back to her feet, and 15 days after her transplant, she was back to cleaning apartments. Michael, who works at a fast-food restaurant to help support the family and dreams of attending college, would have preferred that his mother stay home.

But, he said, “I had no choice. She’s a go-getter.”

Still, at four apartments per week, at \$75 or \$80 each, it was nearly impossible for the family to keep up with the rent — \$1,038 — let alone catch up on months of missed payments on the rent-stabilized apartment that had been their home for 13 years.

In April 2010, after Ms. López found herself in civil housing court, the family’s case was referred to the Community Service Society, one of the seven beneficiary agencies of The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. With a [Neediest Cases](#) grant for one month’s rent, as well as an additional \$2,062 in help from the service society, they were able to avoid becoming homeless.

Ms. López gives the credit to God. “He listened to me,” she said.

The family’s troubles are not over. Ms. López’s [Social Security](#) disability benefits, \$646, expire at the end of January, and she does not yet know how she will afford the many medications she must take for the rest of her life.

Still, Ms. López is certain that faith always provides a solution. And she seems determined to walk with her “head held high” — as another poem on the living room wall states.

“I believe in my God,” she said.